

## Recommended Practices for Family-School-Community Partnerships

Now that we have covered what the research says about the benefits and impact of family engagement practices, let's consider what to do with its findings. As we reflect on those findings, it is important to think about the goals of family engagement practices: to welcome and partner with families, especially diverse and nondominant families. If we are serious about overcoming educational inequities, including racial and socioeconomic inequities, we must intentionally partner with families.

### Recommendation 1: Intentionally cultivate relationships of trust and respect.

- Establish trust and center efforts on children's learning and healthy development.** Ensure that school leaders understand that close and continuous parent-teacher collaboration, based on trust and respect, is essential for student progress. Honoring families' cultures and knowledge allows teachers to deepen their cultural competence, build on families' strengths, and help students appreciate their classmates' diverse backgrounds. Home visits, virtual check-ins, and regular two-way conversations about their children's learning validate parents as experts on their children and show you value them as partners. Those practices also help to correct the power imbalance that can undermine trust. Teachers can also use text messaging, social media, and Internet Parent Portals (such as PowerSchool) to keep two-way communication flowing.
- Include family partnerships in school-improvement plans that center justice as the long-term goal.** While shorter-term, concrete goals such as raising academic outcomes and increasing student attendance are important for tracking progress, they should not be viewed as ends in themselves. True partnerships between families and schools must be a major part of long-term improvement plans, especially those focused on systemic change and social justice. Intentionally including families in these plans further establishes trust, respect, and buy-in.

### Recommendation 2: Start family engagement practices early.

- Start when children are young and equip families to navigate the system.** When children enter a quality early childhood program at age three, they engage in activities that promote their academic and social development, and their caregivers gain skills to encourage their learning. In addition, families develop relationships with other families and teachers and connect to community resources, extending their pool of resources. Families also learn how the education system works and how to express their ideas and concerns to teachers and other staff members, enabling them to advocate and problem-solve for their children and other families' children.
- Welcome families at the beginning of the school year.** Reach out to families at the beginning of the school year in a welcoming and inviting manner. That can be done

through phone calls or videoconferences in which teachers introduces themselves to families. When families feel welcomed and invited, they are more likely to trust their children's teachers and be willing to communicate. When trust is established, families begin to share their realities, dreams, and aspirations for their children, and possible barriers to engagement. As a result, they become better-informed supporters of their children's learning and monitors of their progress.

- **Continue engaging families up to college and career.** Partner with students and families *throughout* the student's educational trajectory: Family engagement practices should occur at all levels of students' education, from early childhood programs to postsecondary institutions (e.g., college and universities and career training programs). Transitions between schools should be seamless. Develop relationships with feeder schools to make the transition as smooth as possible for families.

For example, elementary schools should partner with their local middle schools and connect fifth-grade families to the middle school staff. Middle schools should do the same with their respective high schools. Additionally, as students move through the educational system, the nature of family engagement practices needs to shift to meet their developmental needs. As students get older, invite them to have an active role in their education. Student-led conferences are a great opportunity to empower students to share their academic progress with their educators and families.



### **Recommendation 3: Communicate clearly and continuously.**

- **Establish ongoing two-way communication with families.** Clear, frequent, and continuous communication between families and educators is essential to developing relational trust and strong partnerships. Families want the information they need to support and monitor their children's learning in real time. That information can include notices of upcoming events, updates on their children's academic progress, and details about curriculum, to name a few.
- **Make information accessible.** Information needs to be shared in an accessible manner, meaning it's important to think about the language and platform in which it's shared. Technology, including social media, makes it easy to communicate with families on a regular basis. Yet, it is important to remember that not all families have access to reliable technology or feel comfortable using it. Language translations should be mindfully revised and edited: Sometimes direct translations (such as the ones provided by the Google translates website) are not correct.

- **Link communications to what students are learning.** Develop an open, ongoing dialogue between teachers and parents about children's learning. These three steps allow the partnership to flourish: develop a collaborative relationship and listen actively to parents, focus on supporting critical skills, and co-develop with families a plan for collaborating. With this level of guidance, parents of all backgrounds can support learning at home. These steps can be used, for example, in parent-teacher conferences (or better yet, student-led conferences), workshops, and Zoom check-ins with families. Use social media or SMS messaging to relay tips to families. Be sure the messages support home learning, are linked to what children are learning and doing in class, invite two-way communication, and are written in the families' home language. Adding a personal phone call to communicate about the student's progress can yield even greater gains.

## Recommendation 4: Focus on equity.

- **Provide extra supports so that all families get what they need to support their children's learning.** Ensure that schools, especially those in low-income neighborhoods, have the resources to help families and students to deal with trauma and deprivation, and to build on their strengths. Consider creating family resource centers that offer childcare, referrals to social services and healthcare, GED and English language programs, parent/student leadership training, and other resources that would benefit families. Equip school social workers to organize and lead healing circles and other services to address trauma, and teachers to organize and lead inquiry circles to address implicit bias and structural racism. Begin circles with social-emotional check-ins. Develop an advisory system to ensure that middle and high school parents are in regular contact with someone who knows their child well. Offer after-school programs to provide extended learning time and a way for parents, teachers, and students to connect. Expand learning opportunities by partnering with community organizations to provide social services and after-school and summer programs.
- **Design family engagement practices that consider the realities of family life, such as childcare, work constraints, and the need to feed family members.** When planning family engagement activities such as open houses, parent-teacher conferences, and college application workshops, consider how to make them as inclusive as possible. For example, if a significant number of parents have a 9-to-5 job, hold events on weekends. If families need transportation to and from events, consider providing bus vouchers or moving the events to a more central location. That is why getting to know families is essential: We learn about their constraints and can address them.
- **Share power with families.** Through collective inquiry and continuous learning, schools can work with families and communities to improve outcomes, relationships, and school culture. They can work toward educational equity, building a school environment that reflects the culture and values of its community by having everyone's knowledge and expertise at play. Invite families to be decision-makers. Inviting families to co-create

schoolwide plans and implementation strategies make the work easier and more successful: Families come to understand the importance of social justice and equity ideas. Also, when you share power with families in those ways, families model good citizenship for their children, family members, and neighbors.

## **Recommendation 5: Prepare educators at all levels to work with families.**

- **Provide all educators with professional development on family engagement.**

Educators (including teachers, school and district leaders, school counselors, and other program administrators and staff) need to develop the capacity to work with families. Therefore, they need to be trained on how to communicate authentically with families and develop relationships with them. School leaders need to make time and space for professional development that centers family engagement practices. For example, teachers and staff can be coached on how to take an asset-based stance in their first meeting or phone call with families. At the beginning of the school year, practitioners can ask, “What are your dreams and aspirations for your child?” and “How can we work together to accomplish these goals?”

School staff can be coached on constructive ways to approach home visits and conferences with families. Additionally, they need the opportunity, space, and time to reflect on their family engagement values and practices, which can be accomplished through professional development sessions that allow them to reflect on their practices and their beliefs about the families they work with.

- **Offer family engagement courses to educators during pre-service.** Pre-service teacher programs need to include family engagement courses to expose teachers in training to research that illustrates family engagement’s importance and relevance (like the research presented in this book) and to introduce best practices for working with families. Additionally, pre-service teachers should be given opportunities to work with families. They should, for example, practice having conversations with families, introducing themselves, and discussing families’ hopes and dreams for their children.



## Recommendation 6: Extend networks and partnerships.

- **Create opportunities for parent and family leadership.** Family engagement practices can empower parents and develop their leadership skills. Provide opportunities for family members to use those skills by creating parent and family councils, task forces and committees, parent-teacher associations, and parent and family advisory boards. Be sure those groups are representative of the population the school serves. In other words, recruitment efforts need to include even the “hard to reach” families, which is why having strong relationships with families is essential. Partner with parents to recruit other parents for leadership roles and opportunities. After all, a parent-to-parent relationship is a great source of support.
- **Use community organizing efforts to share power with families.** Leaders in community-based organizations also need to share power with families, especially when they’re organizing and strategizing for social change. Those leaders, as well as members of the organizations, should invest in relational trust (i.e., getting to know community members), learn local histories, and understand the community’s most pressing needs by talking to families and community members of all backgrounds.
- **Leverage outside resources.** Collaborate with local organizations and public officials to bring additional funds, opportunities, and supports into schools and communities. For example, partner with local food banks to provide meals for families, or community health clinics to provide annual vision checks for students. Additionally, it is important that this be a collaborative, power-sharing process with both families and stakeholders. Instead of gathering resources *for* families, work *with* families to develop the relationships and connections they need to achieve their goals. This applies to school-based initiatives and community-based organizations. For example, service planning committees should include parent leaders to advocate for services for which fellow parents have expressed a pressing need.